

## The Attraction of the Mundane

How everyday life contributes to destination attractiveness in the Nordic region

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## **The Attraction of the Mundane - How everyday life contributes to destination attractiveness in the Nordic countries**

### **Abstract**

The paper exhibits how environments, lifestyles and institutions that are considered as mundane parts of everyday life for locals, play an important role for Chinese tourists visiting the Nordic countries - as motivators to visit and as tangible or intangible attractions during the visit. It contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of mundane everyday life in tourism studies, as it highlights that tourists do not only bring their everyday lives to destinations, they also travel to experience tangible and intangible elements that locals may regard as mundane. Based on these findings, the paper aims to position such mundane destination elements not only as a supplement to, but in line with traditional attractions, in terms of their contribution to destination attractiveness. The paper is based on the findings of a qualitative interview study on Chinese tourism to the Nordic countries. The interviewees include fourteen Chinese tourists, sixteen representatives of Chinese tourism intermediaries and six tour guides.

### **Keywords**

Mundane, Attraction, Destination attractiveness, Lifestyle, Institutions, Environment, Everyday life

## Introduction

Tourism has traditionally been considered in opposition to the mundane. The assumption and argument has been that tourists are pushed from their everyday lives and pulled to extraordinary environments, experiences and peoples in their ongoing search for exoticism, liminality and authenticity outside of their everyday lives (e.g. Cary, 2004; Cohen, 1979; MacCannell, 1976; Turner & Turner, 1978; Urry, 1990; Wang, 1999). A number of researchers have since then argued for the opposite, namely that tourism is a mundane activity and that tourism is not an escape from but a part of everyday life (e.g. Edensor, 2007; Franklin, 2004; Hall, 2008; Larsen, 2008; Prince, 2018; Urry & Larsen, 2011). These authors argue that tourists, whether that is a group package tourist or a backpacker, follow a shared common sense, which dictates what it means to be a tourist in specific situations. This common sense is built on a series of conventions, habits, norms, routines and technologies that makes much of tourism as mundane as everyday life. In addition, the performance of these activities is often carried out in serialized spaces or ‘touristscapes’ (Edensor, 2007), which are places that seek to call out feelings of safety and familiarity for the tourist, sometimes under the guise of exoticism or authenticity. Edensor (2007) argues:

“tourism is replete with rigid conventions of its own, habits and routines which shape the particular practices and experiences of tourists, and it is, therefore, also somewhat mundane. (...) although suffused with notions of escape from normativity, tourists carry quotidian habits and responses with them along with their luggage. Tourism thus involves unreflexive, habitual and practical enactions which reflect common sense understandings of how to be a tourist” (p. 199).

The more contemporary perspective on the relationship between tourism and mundanity is thus that they are supplementary and inseparable, rather than opposites. Tourism is part of

mundanity and mundanity is part of tourism. Tourism is a tapestry of meaningful moments and amplified emotions, combined with non-reflexive mundane activities and experiences (Edensor, 2007; Kaaristo & Rhoden, 2017; Larsen, 2008; Löfgren, 2008). Based on this notion, Edensor (2006), Larsen (2008) and others have argued that everyday life should take a more prominent place in tourism studies, so the importance of under-acknowledged routines, objects, interactions, practices and places can receive the attention they deserve. The researchers quoted so far have attempted to do this by investigating the mundanity and everydayness of tourism and the ways that tourists attempt to domesticate tourism spaces and places. Thus, these authors have primarily focused on how tourists bring their everyday lives to a destination. Another less explored option is to approach the topic from a destination point of view, to understand how aspects that locals may consider as mundane, including their own lives and lifestyles, may be part of the attraction for visiting tourists (Maitland, 2008; 2010). This is the point of departure for this paper, which aims to investigate if and how environments, lifestyles and institutions that are considered mundane by locals may contribute to the tourist experience - as important contributors to destination attractiveness and as attractions in their own right. In doing so, it proposes that the contribution of mundane tangible and intangible destination elements to destination attractiveness should be further recognised in tourism research.

The paper is based on the findings from a qualitative study on Chinese tourism to the Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland). This particular case is interesting because of the cultural and geographical distance between the localities. China outbound tourism is relevant in its own right, because it has seen rapid growth over a period of less than 30 years - from virtually nothing to become the world's biggest tourism source market (UNWTO, 2015). Perhaps because of the speed of this development, many depictions of

Chinese tourists remain homogeneous and stereotypical - describing the market as largely consisting of “young/middle aged, urban, (upper) middle class, group travellers, with language difficulties and a need for familiar food, who travels to well-known destinations in near markets, Europe and the USA” (Jørgensen et al., 2018, p. 489). It is evident that such homogeneous depictions are not a true representation of this huge and complex market, and some researchers have demonstrated that travel type, motivations, behaviours and destination choice is highly diverse among Chinese tourists (Jin et al., 2014; Jørgensen et al., 2016, 2018; Jørgensen & Ren, 2015; King & Gardiner, 2015; Prayag et al., 2015). This paper also highlights this diversification.

The paper begins by positioning the attraction of the mundane within the existing (tourism) literature. The study methods are then presented. In the findings section, empirical examples are given, to show how mundane elements of everyday life overlap and together contribute to destination attractiveness for Chinese tourists visiting the Nordic countries. In the conclusion, the hitherto underplayed contribution of the mundane to destination attractiveness is highlighted, before a final reflection is given, on the paper’s practical application and how research on the topic could move forward.

### **The Attraction of the Mundane**

According to Mill and Morrison (1984), a tourist destination consists of a combination of infrastructure, transportation, attractions and hospitality services. Laws (1995) later argued that these elements can be classified into two categories; one which includes climate, ecology, culture and traditional architecture and land forms, and one which includes developments introduced specifically for tourism, including hotels, catering, transport, facilities for activities, amusements etc. This division displays a separation between those

destination elements that exist because of tourism (the latter) and those that exist regardless (the former).

The elements that exist because of tourism have naturally been at the centre of attention in tourism studies. Accommodation and catering have been well covered within the hospitality field (A. Morrison, 2018; A. M. Morrison, 2002). Transport and mobilities are studied rigorously both within and outside the tourism field (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Some researchers have claimed that visitor attractions, including both manmade and natural attractions (Swarbrooke, 2007), is an under-researched area in tourism studies (Connell et al., 2015; Leask, 2010, 2016; Weidenfeld et al., 2010). Despite this claim, Leask (2016) reviewed more than 450 papers on the topic published in the period between 2009 and 2014, which indicates that the topic has received a considerable level of scrutiny.

Certain destination elements that exist regardless of tourism have also been extensively studied in a tourism context. Relevant examples include encounters between local communities and tourists (e.g. Salazar, 2012) and the relation between tourism and heritage (e.g. Park, 2010). Studies on encounters between tourists from developed countries and locals from developing countries have dominated research on the relations between tourists and locals (e.g. Ernawati et al., 2017; Tasci & Severt, 2017; Zhang et al., 2017). Perhaps because of this, the focus has mainly been on challenges and potential problems in such relations. The positive potential in such encounters have received less attention. Albeit only tangentially, these potentials have been investigated in the context of destination attractiveness. Based on an extensive review of the literature, Reitsamer et al. (2016) highlighted “local community” as one of four factors that affect destination attractiveness. The literature on the importance of local communities for destination attractiveness reveals that tourists who experience local community, culture and heritage are more likely to have memorable tourism experiences and

report higher levels of satisfaction (J.-H. Kim et al., 2012; Murphy et al., 2000; Reitsamer et al., 2016). This is evident with the emergence of Airbnb and similar accommodation facilitators that positions authentic experiences and immersion into local communities at the experiential core (Mody et al., 2019; Paulauskaite et al., 2017). In the Nordic countries it is apparent in the recent strategy of Wonderful Copenhagen, who gained worldwide media-attention by positioning “localhood” as the core of their 2020 strategy dubbed “The end of tourism as we know it” (Wonderful Copenhagen, 2018). Recent research has also shown how tourists increasingly seek out areas that have little or no conventional tourist attractions (e.g. den Hoed & Russo, 2017; Larsen et al., 2007; Maitland, 2008; Novy & Colomb, 2019). Examples of this include Urry who argued that “seeing of ordinary aspects of social life being undertaken by people in unusual contexts” was an important part of producing the tourist gaze (Urry, 2002, pp. 12–13); Maitland (2010) who, in his study of visitors to “off-the-beaten-track” areas of London, found that “everyday life was at the heart of the regions' appeal” (p. 181); and Richards and Wilson (2007) who proposed that city tourism is shifting from a reliance on tangible resources, such as museums and monuments, to intangible resources such as lifestyle, images and creativity.

The latter point highlights a related tendency, namely that tourists increasingly seek out intangible attributes in the destination. The emergence of the concept of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is a good example of this. Research on ICH was propelled when UNESCO positioned it on par with tangible heritage at their 2003 convention (S. Kim et al., 2019). Here UNESCO defined ICH as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage” (UNESCO, 2003). Since this recognition, researchers have demonstrated the

importance of ICH as one of the main motivations for travel (Masoud et al., 2018; Vidal González, 2008), as contributing significant social and economic benefits to destinations (George, 2010; Smuka, 2016) and as a way to increase awareness of a communities national identity (Smuka, 2016).

Although they have not always directly aimed at doing so, and have done it in different research silos, the research described here, have broadened understandings of destination attractiveness and tourist attractions to also encompass tangible and intangible destination elements, not intended for tourism. Despite this, the mundane aspects of destinations including environments and daily lives of locals are still rarely treated as contributors to destination attractiveness in line with traditional tourism attractions in tourism literature. Instead, they are seen as a sideshow to the “proper” attractions of a destination, which are typically defined as “a permanent resource, either natural or man-made, which is developed and managed for the primary purpose of attracting visitors” (Hu & Wall, 2005, p. 619). This builds on an understanding of tourist attractions as a single entity bounded by geographic space. Yet, the developments described here, where tourists, to a large extent, are drawn to a destination to experience local communities and intangible elements, suggest that such definitions of attractions may be too limited. This is recognized in UNWTOs definition where it is stated that “anything a tourist does in the destination can be considered as an attraction” (UNWTO, 2011).

This paper contributes to this change in perspective, as it demonstrates how mundane environments and aspects of local life in The Nordic countries act as important attractions for Chinese travellers who visit the region, and are among the reasons for them to visit in the first place. In doing so, the paper positions mundane environments, lifestyles and institutions in



line with traditional attractions, not only as a supplement to them, in terms of their contribution to destination attractiveness.

## **Method**

The paper is based on a qualitative study of Chinese tourism to the Nordic countries. A narrow definition of the Nordic countries is adopted, which includes Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway (excluding Iceland, The Faroe Islands and Greenland). This delimitation was made to match the travel patterns of Chinese tourists who most often visit two to four of these countries when they travel to the Nordics. 36 in-depth interviews were conducted, with respectively: 14 Chinese tourists who had visited the Nordic countries within the last three years (Table 1), 16 representatives of Chinese tourism intermediaries working with Chinese tourism to the Nordic countries (Table 2) and six tour guides who accompanied Chinese tour groups around the Nordic countries (Table 3). The purpose of including both tourists, intermediaries and tour guides was to offer a level of triangulation. The intention was to gain insights on the aspects that contribute to destination attractiveness for the tourist from different perspectives, not to compare or differentiate between the views of tourists, intermediaries and guides respectively.

In terms of data collection, the researcher aimed to include certain representatives from the very large and prominent tour operators and travel agents in China - these were approached directly. The rest of the intermediaries were recruited through local tourism business media, who had connections to a large number of relevant actors in the industry. The tour guides were recruited through the company representatives already interviewed. Finally, the tourists were recruited through the extended network of relevant colleagues and through announcements on social media. Five of the interviews with tourists were conducted face-to-face, the rest were conducted via WeChat call, as this was the preferred mode of

communication for these interviewees. The tourist interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. All but three intermediary interviews were conducted face-to-face at the company premises in Beijing. Two of the final three were conducted at the company premises in Helsinki, while the last interview was conducted via WeChat call. These interviews also lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Five of the interviews with tour guides were conducted face-to-face in Beijing at the company premises, while the last one was conducted via telephone. These interviews lasted between 15 and 40 minutes. An interpreter accompanied the researcher for all interviews with Chinese speaking company representatives, except in cases where the respondent specified that they did not want/need it. However, the interpreter was only actively used in four interviews, because the English speaking ability of the rest of the interviewees was sufficient. In these cases the interpreter's role was to create a comfortable atmosphere and to assist in potential instances of miscommunication between interviewer and interviewee. In order to qualify the translation, the researcher transcribed the translations made by the interpreter, hired a translator to transcribe and translate the Chinese content and then compared the two English versions (the interpreter's version and the translator's version).

All tourist interviewees were between the age of 20 and 45 and relatively well educated. This overrepresentation of relatively young and well-educated interviewees introduces a potential bias, as these interviewees may have views that differ from those of other demographic groups. The study aimed to limit the effects of this bias, by including tour guides/leaders who represented the opinions of general (group) tourists as well as the views of intermediaries, who are targeting a broad market of Chinese tourists. The fact that the author and interviewer is from a Nordic country introduces another bias, as it suggests that the interviewees might present their views in a different (perhaps more positive) light to “give face” (给面子) to the

interviewer. The risk of this was limited in the following ways: (1) the interviews were conducted one-on-one (giving face is normally a social act done to improve a person's standing in front of others); (2) multiple interview channels were included to triangulate findings from different actors including intermediaries and guides, who are describing the experience of others, rather than relaying their own experiences; (3) the tourists' were not probed directly about the mundane elements, but asked openly about what made them choose the Nordic countries and about their best experiences as they visited, meaning that the interviewees had the opportunity to give face by recognising architecture or other elements in the destination.

Initially the intention of the study was not to focus on mundane destination attributes. The aim of the interviews was to gain information about why Chinese tourists chose to travel to the Nordic countries, what experiences they value when they visit, and what they take away from their visit. When conducting an initial thematic analysis of the data, the researcher found that some of the primary reasons to visit and many of the experiences that the tourists valued most, had little to do with the traditional attractions that appear in marketing material. Instead, the focus was often on intangible and mundane aspects of everyday life in the Nordic countries. This piqued the researcher's interest, who then proceeded to conduct a thematic analysis with these specific aspects in mind. This process of discovery has both positive and negative implications. On the positive side, the fact that the interviewees were not probed directly and specifically about the analysis topics, but brought them up on their own, means that the researcher did not introduce a bias towards the importance of particular aspects. This adds to the credibility of the findings. On the negative side, the fact that these elements were not the centre of attention in the interview situation means that more information could perhaps have been obtained if this had been the case. Because of this limitation, the study

should be considered as a first step in an effort to better understand the actual contribution of mundane elements to destination attractiveness. Further research should be done in order to develop and deepen these understandings and their implications. This also includes investigating whether similar findings appear in other cases, including whether it is unique to Chinese tourists visiting the Nordic countries, to Asian travellers, Nordic destinations, long haul travel etc.

## **Findings**

Both tourists, intermediaries and guides mentioned a number of different attractions of the Nordic countries that cannot be categorised within the definitions of traditional tourist attractions. These elements were both mentioned as reasons to go and among the best experiences when visiting the Nordic countries. Three central concepts emerged through the thematic analysis that all relate to mundane life in the Nordic countries: environment, lifestyle and institutions.

### *Environment*

When asked about why the tourists chose to go to the Nordic countries and about the positive experiences that they had during their trip, the ‘environment’ was often mentioned as important by the respondents. The term ‘environment’ referred to different elements for different respondents, for some it was related to the natural attractions. For many, however, it was about less tangible aspects related to the perceived cleanliness of the natural environment, including air and water quality. This is exemplified in the following two quotes from a tourist and an intermediary respectively:

Interviewee: “... we enjoyed the environment, and the people there are very good for us”

Interviewer: “What do you mean by the people were good?”

Interviewee: “Very good, very friendly”

Interviewer: And you said you also enjoyed the environment. What do you mean by that?

Interviewee: “The air quality I think.. the air quality”  
(Tourist\_13)

Interviewer: What parts of the tour does tourists like the most?

Interviewee: “The first one is fiord, it is good value. But another, I think is the clean air, clean water, clean environment.”  
(Intermediary\_2)

The quality of the environment in the Nordic countries, was considered in opposition to the tourists’ home environment. The fact that clean air and water is becoming a rarity in some Chinese cities makes it something tourists’ would like to experience when they travel. This was made explicit by intermediaries who explained that they were using the cleanliness of the environment in the Nordic countries as part of their marketing:

“now the environment in China is not so perfect, so we will promote Northern (European) countries by environmental factors.”  
(Intermediary\_3)

Other important aspects that were considered as part of the ‘environment’ was the uncrowdedness and the lack of Chinese tourists in particular, as well as the perceived safety and tranquillity of the destination(s). These aspects were considered in comparison to other destinations in Europe, and both tourists and guides mentioned that they considered the Nordic countries to be safer and less crowded than other European destinations:

“I don’t want to be that kind of mass tourist and I like nature views, I like hiking. So I like some place where I don’t need to meet too many Chinese tourists, like in France”  
(Tourist\_12)

“Generally speaking Scandinavia is much safer than Paris or Italy...”  
(Tour Leader/Guide\_04)

Environmental factors played an important role both to the companies and to tourists, but were rarely considered in isolation. Instead, the respondents associated the clean environment with lifestyle practices.

## *Lifestyle*

Similar to ‘environment’, experiencing and participating in the local ‘lifestyle’ was considered as reasons to go, as well as among the best experiences at the destination(s):

“the Scandinavians, you have a very good image in Chinese tourists’ mind, as a very pure and very quiet image. (...) Different from what we, what China or what, I don’t know, just unique I think. It represents kind of a spirit that is very liberal, very clean and healthy and eco and environmentally friendly and life quality stuff...”

(Tourist\_14)

This quote illustrates how the tourists associated peaceful lifestyle, liberal values, and environmental consciousness with the Nordic countries. Some tourists saw the opportunity to become part of this lifestyle as a peak experience during their trip:

Interviewer: “What were the best experiences during the trip?”

Interviewee: “I really enjoyed the, how to say..? The feeling, you get to know another culture, another lifestyle. You put yourself inside all the people, you listen to how the people talk to each other and you see what their daily life is like. We do have differences between the lifestyles and I think the Nordic countries peoples’ lifestyle is quite the way I like, because you know, I didn’t see any fights, arguments or terrible, bad things. People are always smiling to each other and they are really nice. I think it is something you can feel when you get inside. It is something like, nothing is happening, but you still feel happy. You feel everything is good, everything is great.”

(Tourist\_05)

A number of intangible elements contributed to the overall feeling that the interviewees described as the ‘lifestyle’ in the Nordic countries. The feelings described here resemble aspects that have previously been described as part of a ‘slow’ movement (Honore’, 2004), that also includes ‘slow tourism’, where tourists are actively seeking out experiences and ways of travel that allow for more ‘slow’ and mindful consumption (Fullagar et al., 2012; Varley & Semple, 2015). This movement is founded in a counter cultural longing to slow down and to value for example quality and meaning, rather than quantity, convenience and efficiency (Honore’, 2004). However, unlike the slow-tourists described in previous

literature, the tourists interviewed for this study still travel on relatively fast paced, even

frantic itineraries. This is a further indication, that they regard this lifestyle and their temporary participation in it, as an attraction to be sought out and temporarily experienced, rather than a more permanent state of mind founded in a counter cultural movement (Honore', 2004).

The local people were also important. Like many other destinations, friendliness of the local people was considered to be an important asset and was highlighted by the interviewees:

“The sights were very good, it’s very beautiful there and the people are friendly”  
(Tourist\_03)

“I think that people there are very gentle and most of the people can speak English. It is nice, walking on the street and if I am lost, I can ask any one and any one will be very gentle, answer me and direct me where I want to go.”  
(Tourist\_09)

Some tourists enjoyed observing the local people, who they perceived to be happy and enjoying life. This was already described in some of the quotes above and is further exemplified in the following quote:

Interviewer: How would you say, if you have to compare your trip to Northern Europe to your many other trips around Europe, how would you say, how is it different. Is it better or worse, or how is it different?

Interviewee: “Generally, I think it is better, because it is not very populated and its clean everywhere and I can see from my point of view that people enjoy living there. So I think generally its better.”  
(Tourist\_10)

According to some tourists, part of enjoying life in the Nordic countries was what they described as a slow and relaxed pace of life, that they could see and experience:

Interviewee: “When you walk on the street, you can see the people, they are very nice, even the strangers, they smile to you and they ask you if you need any favour and they enjoy helping others and it is not like that in China. (...) The living rapid is much slower than in China (...) I'm not saying the speed of working, but the living rapid, yes.”

Interviewer: “So to you it was more the environment, the way people acted, that was the highlight, more than any sightseeing?”

Interviewee: "... lots of places they have good views around the world, no matter in China or in other countries. So actually the view is not the thing that attracts me first."  
(Tourist\_07)

Some of the interviewed tour guides and representatives of tour operators/travel agents explained that the tourists were increasingly aware that the Nordic 'lifestyle' was tied to certain 'institutions'.

### *Institutions*

Among these institutions (understood as "integrated systems of rules that structure social interactions" (Hodgson, 2015, p. 501)), the Nordic welfare state and its model of redistribution was a key point of interest for the Chinese visitors:

Interviewer: And what are they [the tourists] talking about when they talk about Scandinavia?

Interviewee: "Welfare!"

Interviewer: So the welfare system is actually an important factor?

Interviewee: "Yes, the natural, the natural things like the forest, like the lakes, like the beach. I do believe that there are much more places in the world, more beautiful than Scandinavia. But the welfare. I mean Scandinavia is very unique in the world."

(Tour Leader/Guide\_6)

"They are interested in your society, and your social welfare." (Intermediary\_2)

A representative of a large tour operator explained how Chinese travellers were increasingly interested in learning from their travels, and that experiencing societies that function in ways that they would like China to function, was part of this trend:

Interviewer: "When you are telling me that one of the reasons they want to go is because of the clean environment and the social security system, good education system. How do you know that from the costumer? Do they tell you?"

Interviewee: "... it's a kind of trend, I think in Chinese peoples' mind. That they want to look for some good things to learn, to experience, to see. Maybe they will know, 'maybe we should live like them'. Not a specific demand: 'I want to go to see some social security or like that'. Maybe they will just have a desire for it."

(Intermediary\_4)



This more ideological want for learning was also represented by the tourist interviewees. One of them explained how he wanted to return to the Nordic countries and bring his child who had been born since he was there, so his son could learn about other ways to live:

Interviewee: “If we got the opportunity I will go there again. To bring my child to see the environment, over there, to see the people there. To see everything over there, to open his eyes.”

Interviewer: What do you mean by that - to open his eyes?

Interviewee: “To open his eyes, to look around to see how people. I don’t want my child to just stay in China for his whole life. Yeah. Like me. Have the opportunity to go outside. Have a look and get some experiences over there and to enrich his life. Enrich his life.”

(Tourist\_09)

“Some people, they will bring their children, they will go there to feel the environment and the civilization.”

(TourLeader\_05)

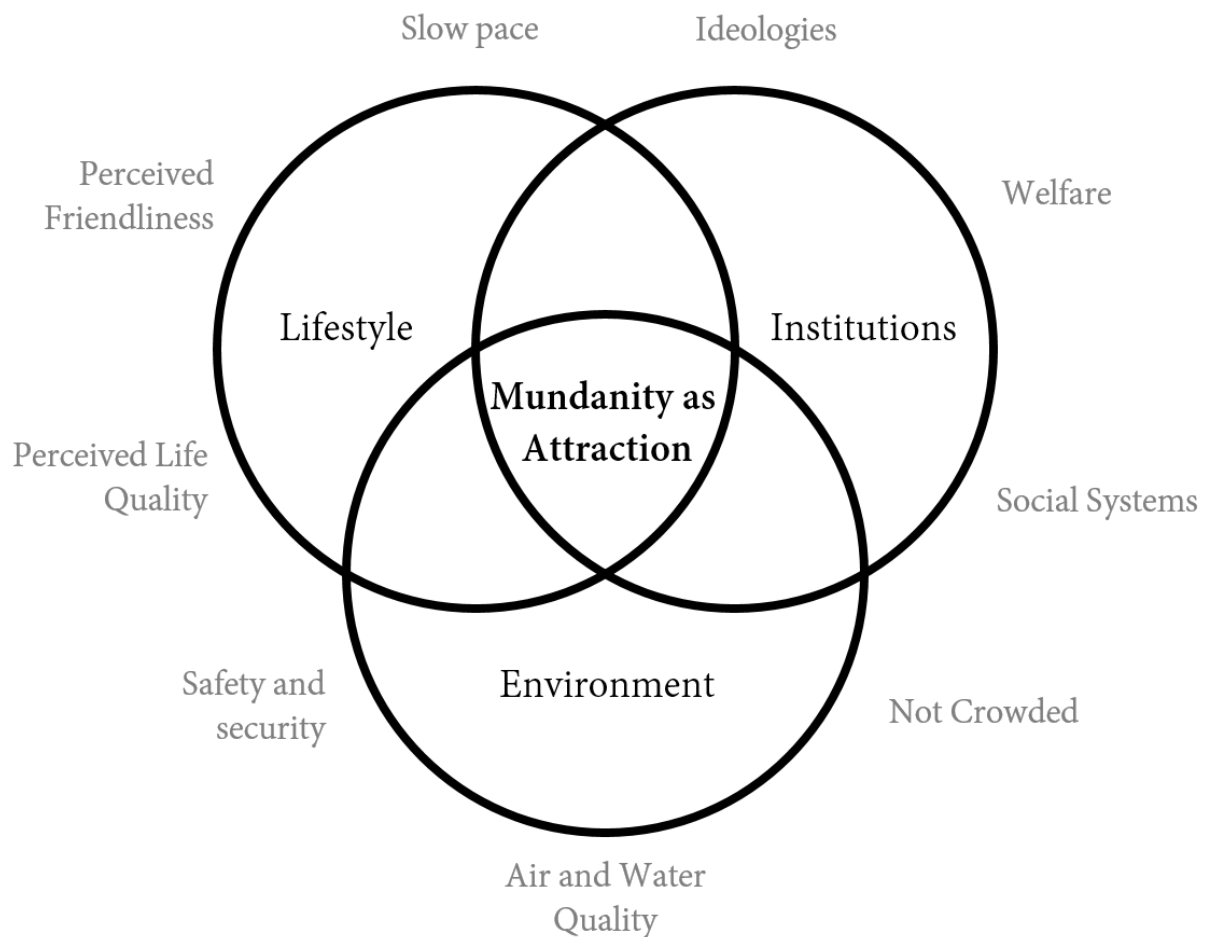
These quotes indicate that part of the attraction of the Nordic countries may be ideological, as some travelers were visiting the Nordic countries to see, or show their children, institutionalized ways of living different from those in their home country.

### *The overlap*

The analysis indicates that three interrelated elements contributed to the positive experiences and expectations the tourists had of the Nordic countries – environment, lifestyle and institutions. On their own, these elements might not be enough to attract tourists to a destination. A clean environment can be experienced in many places, so can a particular lifestyle or type of institution. It is in the overlap between these elements that mundanity may become attractive to tourists. In the overlap between environment and institutions, we find the practices which help create and maintain the clean environment that the tourists value. In the overlap between lifestyle and institutions, we find the social and welfare systems that fascinate the tourists. The intangible positive feelings described by the tourists can

be found in the overlap between the clean environment and the lifestyle that the tourists describe. Together, the overlap between these three aspects transform mundanity to an attraction for Chinese tourists visiting the Nordic countries (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Mundanity as attraction



The combination and association of these elements to create the attraction of mundanity in the Nordic countries was reflected in a number of utterings by the interviewees. When asked to reflect on the overall experience after their visit, one respondent for example said:

“For me, what I remember most is the lifestyle and the local people of the Scandinavian countries (...) the people they don’t have much pressure, from social. And they are enjoying their life there. That is what I like the most. And also, the environment is very good. Especially the air.”  
(Tourist\_07)

A tour leader said the following about the typical evaluation he would get from the travellers:

“I think in my groups, I think 95 or 97 percent of people they are quite interested, they feel very good. Not only the scenery, but the most important is the attitude for life. I mean for the local people. In Scandinavia they take everything easy, not so hurry, no so rush like the Chinese. We have very high social pressures and too many people, so I have asked many times from my people when they finish the trips in Scandinavia. ‘What do you think was the part, you like very much? Which part, what makes you think it is so interesting or that you like it very much?’ They say blue sky, fresh air and very quiet place, nice people, smiling people.”

(Tour Leader/Guide\_04)

Another tour leader provided a similar comment and added that this differs from other countries in Europe:

“They [the Chinese group travellers] basically tell me every day, they repeat a lot, ‘this is so beautiful here’. They love the peaceful environment, society and also love the nature, the air, the water – not polluted. And also the local people there, that is the thing I love a lot, the local people there in Scandinavia. For me, I travel through Europe, I work in different countries, sometimes I guide them through. Scandinavian people are so trustable. So trustable. When you settle with someone on something, it is settled. That is wonderful for us.”

Interviewer: So it is actually more about the environment, the broader things, than the specific sight, church or castle?

Interviewee: “Yes, the tourists are more interested in your nature and your society, and the feeling of your countries, it is totally different from the West and the South [Western and Southern Europe].”

(Tour Leader/Guide\_01)

These examples, where respondents are asked to reflect on their overall opinion of their visit, exemplify both the overlapping nature of mundane lifestyles, environments, and institutions in the minds of the travellers, as well as their presence and importance as top of mind attractions, for travellers visiting the region.

## **Conclusion and Implications**

This paper suggests that our current understanding of destination attractiveness and attractions may be too limited. Tourism literature has recognised that tourists increasingly

seek out areas with little or no conventional tourist attractions (e.g. den Hoed & Russo, 2017; Larsen et al., 2007; Maitland, 2008; Novy & Colomb, 2019), as well as intangible destination attributes (George, 2010; Maitland, 2010; Masoud et al., 2018; Richards & Wilson, 2007; Smuka, 2016). This signifies a changing perspective in terms of what constitutes a tourist attraction and what contributes to destination attractiveness. Yet, tangible and intangible mundane destination attributes are still rarely treated as contributors to destination attractiveness in line with traditional tourism attractions in tourism literature.

This paper contributes to this change in perspective, as it demonstrates how the overlap of lifestyles, environments, and institutions of mundane life in the Nordic countries act as important attractions for Chinese travellers who visit the region, and are among the reasons for them to visit in the first place. The attractiveness of the mundane is different from other cases where for example certain lifestyles may be able to attract tourists on their own, since many such cases attempt to uphold, enhance or stage such lifestyles for the purpose of tourism.

It is suggested, that at least in the case of Chinese tourism to the Nordic countries, it is the overlap between certain lifestyles, institutions that support them and environments that complement them, that contemporary mundanity may become or be utilised as a tourist attraction. With this, the paper positions mundane destination elements, not only as a supplement to, but in line with traditional attractions in terms of their contribution to destination attractiveness.

In doing so, the paper also adds to an ongoing discussion about the role of mundane everyday life in tourism studies, as it highlights that tourists do not only bring their everyday lives to destinations (Edensor, 2007; Kaaristo & Rhoden, 2017; Larsen, 2008; Löfgren, 2008), they also travel to experience tangible and intangible elements that locals may regard as mundane.

Finally, the paper also contributes to literature on China outbound tourism, as it exemplifies the diversity of the Chinese market and highlights that stereotypical representations of this large market do not hold true (Jin et al., 2014; Jørgensen et al., 2016, 2018; Jørgensen & Ren, 2015; King & Gardiner, 2015; Prayag et al., 2015).

The results indicate that destinations in The Nordic countries and perhaps in other regions, would benefit from further valuing and marketing mundane aspects as tourist attractions. A primary reason for this is that the ‘attractions’ are already there and therefore require little investment. Another advantage is that this furthers investments that support and benefit existing environments and communities, rather than try to change these to accommodate imagined tourist needs. The tacit- and elusiveness of these mundane elements present a challenge, as it may be difficult for private actors to monetise. This is perhaps a reason that these types of attractions have received less attention in tourism research. This study shows that despite the potential lack of direct opportunities for monetisation, these attractions are still relevant, as they contribute to overall destination attractiveness and help to draw tourists to a destination and give them pleasant and memorable experiences as they visit.

Generalizability is not an aim of this study; rather its qualitative results should be seen as a first step towards further development of the idea and concept of mundanity as attraction. As described in the method, certain biases may also have affected the results of this study.

Further research is needed to enhance the validity of the findings and to further scrutinise the concept. Such research should for example: (1) replicate the study with non-Nordic interviewer(s), other respondent groups and a specific focus on mundane aspects, to validate the findings; (2) investigate similar cases of geographically and culturally distant travellers to Nordic destinations, to substantiate the findings; (3) investigate culturally distant travellers to other destinations in order to determine whether this type of attraction is unique to the Nordic

context; (4) investigate other cases where travellers and destinations are geographically and culturally closer, to determine the importance of geographical and cultural proximity.

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Table 1: Tourist Interviewees

| Nr. | Profession                      | Type of trip                               | Length of stay    | Origin         | Countries visited during the trip             | Interview Method |
|-----|---------------------------------|--|-------------------|----------------|---|------------------|
| 1   | Student                         | Group tour                                 | 16 days           | Shanghai       | Finland and Sweden                            | WeChat Call      |
| 2   | Student                         | Group tour                                 | 10 days           | Shanghai       | All four countries                            | WeChat Call      |
| 3   | Student                         | Independent leisure                        | 5 days            | Shanghai       | Norway  | Face to face     |
| 4   | Academic                        | Conference and leisure                     | 7 days            | Beijing        | Finland and Sweden                            | Face to face     |
| 5   | Professional: Procurement       | Independent leisure                        | 10 days           | Beijing        | All four countries                            | Face to face     |
| 6   | Professional: Architect         | Group tour                                 | 7 days            | Beijing        | All four countries                            | WeChat Call      |
| 7   | Professional: Tour operation    | Group tour                                 | 7 days            | Beijing        | All four countries                            | WeChat Call      |
| 8   | Professional: IT                | Independent leisure                        | 8 days            | Beijing        | Denmark and Norway                            | WeChat Call      |
| 9   | Student                         | Independent leisure trip                   | 3 days            | Beijing        | Sweden  | WeChat Call      |
| 10  | Professional: Transport Planner | Independent leisure trip                   | 8 days            | Beijing        | Finland, Denmark and Sweden                   | WeChat Call      |
| 11  | Student                         | Independent leisure + VFR                  | 4 days            | Guangzhou      | Denmark, Norway and Sweden                    | WeChat Call      |
| 12  | PhD Student                     | Independent leisure                        | 9 days            | Dalian/Beijing | Norway  | Face to face     |
| 13  | Academic                        | Group tour                                 | 10 days           | Nanjing        | All four countries                            | WeChat Call      |
| 14  | Student                         | Trip 1: Independent leisure<br>Trip 2: VFR | 12 days<br>5 days | Shenzhen       | T1: Finland, Sweden, Norway<br>T2: Copenhagen | Face to face     |

Table 2: Intermediary Interviewees

| Nr. | Type of company                        | Reason for inclusion              | Representative Role  | Interview Method/Place                 |
|-----|--|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| 1   | Tour operator and travel agent (TO/TA) | One of the biggest TO/TA in China | Manager of Hotel Management Dept                                 | Face to face, Beijing                  |
| 2   | Tour operator and travel agent (TO/TA) | One of the biggest TO/TA in China | Vice President for Beijing Branch                                | Face to face (w. interpreter), Beijing |
| 3   | Tour operator and travel agent (TO/TA) | One of the biggest TO/TA in China | Deputy General Manager, responsible for Outbound Tour Department | Face to face, Beijing                  |

|    |  |  |   |  |
|----|--|--|---|--|
| 4  | Tour operator and travel agent (TO/TA)               | One of the biggest TO/TA in China              | Product Expert, Business Manager Europe Travel Center               | Face to face, Beijing                  |
| 5  | Tour operator, niche travel agent/wholesaler (TO/TA) | Smaller TO/TA                                  | Owner and Reservation/operation representative                      | Face to face, Beijing                  |
| 6  | Tour operator and travel Agent (TO/TA)               | Niche TO/TA                                    | Manager of outbound business  | Face to face (w. interpreter), Beijing |
| 7  | Wholesaler   | Focused on Nordic countries                    | Europe Director   | Face to face (w. interpreter), Beijing |
| 8  | Wholesaler   | Focused on Nordic countries                    | Product Operation Manager - Northern Europe, Eastern Europe, Russia | Face to face (w. interpreter), Beijing |
| 9  | Niche wholesaler                                     | Focused on in-depth travel to Nordic countries | Director  | Face to face, Beijing                  |
| 10 | OTA  | One of the biggest Chinese OTAs in China       | International Market Manager, International Hotel Department        | WeChat Call                            |
| 11 | DMC  | Focused on in-depth travel to Nordic countries | General Manager   | Face to face, Beijing                  |
| 12 | DMC  | Large European DMC                             | Destination Manager Finland   | Face to face, Helsinki                 |
| 13 | Niche DMC  | Focused on Northern Europe                     | Project Manager   | Face to face, Helsinki                 |
| 14 | DMC and wholesaler                                   | China Office of Nordic DMO                     | Inbound Tour Consultant   | Face to face, Beijing                  |
| 15 | DMO  | China Office of Nordic DMO                     | Chief Representative  | Face to face, Beijing                  |
| 16 | DMO  | China Office of Nordic DMO                     | Travel Trade Manager  | Face to face, Beijing                  |

Table 3: Tour Leader/Guide Interviewees

| Nr. | Company Name                | Representative Role | Interview Method/Place |
|-----|-----------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| 1   | Large Chinese tour operator | Tour Leader         | Face to face, Beijing  |
| 2   | Large Chinese tour operator | Tour Leader         | Face to face, Beijing  |
| 3   | Large Chinese tour operator | Tour Leader         | Face to face, Beijing  |
| 4   | Large Chinese tour operator | Tour Leader         | Face to face, Beijing  |
| 5   | Large Chinese tour operator | Tour Leader         | Face to face, Beijing  |
| 6   | Independent                 | Tour Guide          | WeChat Call            |

(Interviewees requested to be anonymized)